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ABSTRACT

This book identifies and examines the political dimensions of decentralization. Decentralization programs vary from country to country, but there are common threads and fundamental questions in all situations. The book covers the following themes and topics: (1) a case study of school decentralization in Colombia over a period of more than two decades; (2) why decentralization is political; (3) why countries decentralize; (4) what decentralization accomplishes; (5) the importance of developing consensus; and (6) how to begin building consensus. (Contains 32 references.) (EH)

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DIRECTIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

Decentralization of Education

Politics and Consensus

EDWARD B. FIL

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Edward B. Fiske

The World Bank
Washington, D.C.

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Edward B. Fiske, the former education editor of the *New York Times*, is the creator and editor of the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* (Times Books) and the author of *Smart Schools, Smart Kids* (Simon and Schuster). He wrote this Directions in Development book as a consultant to the World Bank's Human Development Department.

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Preface

Decentralization of schools is truly a global phenomenon. Nations as large as India and as tiny as Burkina Faso are doing it. Decentralization has been fostered by democratic governments in Australia and Spain and by an autocratic military regime in Argentina. It takes forms ranging from elected school boards in Chicago to school clusters in Cambodia to vouchers in Chile.

This global fascination with decentralization has manifold roots. Business leaders have discovered the limitations of large, centralized bureaucracies in dealing with rapidly changing market conditions. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the struggles of other socialist states have weakened faith in centralized states and increased the pressure for democratization. The worldwide recessions of the late 1980s and early 1990s have drawn attention to the crucial role of education in building sound economies, and experience has shown that many centralized systems of education are simply not working. A global debate about the proper role of the state has led to more emphasis on the concepts of free markets, competition, and even privatization.

Decentralization of schools is a complex process that can result in major changes in the way school systems go about making policy, generating revenues, spending funds, training teachers, designing curricula, and managing local schools. Inherent in such changes are fundamental shifts in the values that undergird public education—values that concern the relationships of students and parents to schools, the relationships of communities to central government, and, indeed, the very meaning and purpose of public education.

School decentralization is also a highly political process. By definition, it involves substantial shifts—or at least the perception of shifts—in power. It affects the influence and livelihood of important groups such as teachers and their unions. Education is critical to national economic development, and school systems are vehicles for enhancing political influence and for carrying out the programs and objectives of those in power. School decentralization schemes often succeed or fail for reasons that have more to do with politics than with technical design.

This book is designed to assist political and educational policymakers and practitioners in developing countries, as well as staff members of donor agencies and nongovernmental organizations and other outsiders who are seeking to help such countries move toward the goal of education for all. Its purpose is to identify the political dimensions of decentralization and to heighten sensitivity to them. Decentralization programs will vary widely from country to country, but there are common threads and, above all, fundamental questions to be asked in all situations.

This book covers the following themes and topics:

- *A case study of school decentralization.* The first chapter tells the story of how one country, Colombia, went about decentralizing its schools and then adjusting this policy over a period of more than two decades. Colombia's experience demonstrates that decentralization is a complex enterprise and that the road from concept to implementation is by no means straight.
- *Why decentralization is political.* Understanding the political dynamics of decentralization is crucial to the success of any decentralization program. The second chapter defines and discusses the inherently political nature of school decentralization.
- *Why countries decentralize.* National leaders have many reasons for decentralizing, most of which have little to do with the improvement of learning. The third chapter describes nine countries that decentralized—for nine different reasons.
- *What does decentralization accomplish?* The fourth chapter is a brief survey of what we know about the effects of school decentralization on learning, administrative efficiency, school finance, and equity. One conclusion is that school decentralization, in and of itself, is no panacea. It can be a political success but still do nothing to improve teaching and learning, and it can have undesirable side effects, such as widening the gaps between rich and poor. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improving teaching and learning.
- *The importance of developing consensus.* If school decentralization is going to have a positive impact on learning without exacerbating problems of equity, it is important to involve as many stakeholders in the process as possible. The fifth chapter looks at the problems and possibilities inherent in building consensus.
- *How to build consensus.* Not many countries have tried to build broad public consensus around school decentralization, but the experience of those that have done so offers some practical lessons. This is the subject of the final chapter.

Acknowledgments

This book, part of a larger effort by the Education Group of the World Bank's Human Development Department to understand the decentralization of education systems, provides an overview of best practice and experience. It was written under the direct supervision of Marlaine Lockheed, task manager, and the general guidance of Maris O'Rourke, senior education adviser. The book benefited from discussion with other members of the team working on education decentralization—Rajayswar Bhowon, Robb Cooper, Cathy Gaynor, Eluned Schweitzer, and Carolyn Winter—and department staff, including Nicholas Burnett, Tom Eisemon, Bruno Laporte, Lauritz Holm-Nielsen, Harry Patrinos, Sverrir Sigurdsson, and Jee-Peng Tan. It was reviewed by the Bankwide Advisory Committee for the Education Decentralization work program, comprising Albert Aime, Sue Berryman, Hans Binswanger, Elizabeth King, Dzingai Mutumbuka, Juan Prawda, and Alcyone Saliba. In addition, Gustavo Arica, Halsey Beemer, Jo Brosenhan, Tim Campbell, David Chapman, Dennis Rondinelli, Manuel Vera, and Donald Winkler provided much-appreciated time and advice. A draft was presented at the annual meetings of the Comparative and International Education Society on March 7, 1996. Margot Verbeeck provided excellent word processing assistance, and American Writing Corporation edited and laid out the text.

The Story of Decentralization in Colombia

The story of school decentralization in Colombia reflects the experiences of many countries, not only in Latin America but also in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. It offers a prime example of a country where national leaders saw school decentralization as a means to achieve a political goal—in this case stability and legitimacy for the central government—and where the educational impact was, at best, mixed. Colombia is also an example of a nation where decentralization was carried out by leaders with little interest in building popular support among those directly affected by the change, including teachers.

In the late 1980s Colombia was a nation on the brink of political, economic, and social collapse. The corrupting influence of warring drug cartels was pervasive. Both leftist and rightist terrorist guerrilla armies roamed the country, and the assassination of politicians, police officers, journalists, and even college professors and school principals was an almost daily occurrence. Political leaders realized that something had to be done to restore stability and order to their violence-torn nation of 30 million. The first step was to restore credibility to the government itself.

The path chosen by Colombia was to undertake a major shift of power from the central government, which had exercised ironclad control over the political process, to political, economic, and other institutions on the periphery. By giving ordinary citizens a greater role in managing public institutions, the reasoning went, it would be possible to reestablish the legitimacy of those institutions.

The first step toward decentralization came in 1985 with the decision to allow popular election of the mayors of Colombia's 1,024 municipalities and, shortly afterward, of the thirty-three governors of states. In 1989 the Congress approved legislation giving municipalities a greater role in basic services, such as education and health. In 1990 when President César Gaviria took office, a comprehensive economic reform package was enacted that reduced central regulation of trade and finance and encouraged privatization of service in fields such as

roads and electrical power. These efforts culminated in 1991 with the drafting of a new constitution that codified the earlier piecemeal changes and introduced other measures to promote democratic ideas and procedures. A central objective of the decentralization effort was to break up what has been described as the "oligarchical democracy," (Hanson 1995b, 103) under which Colombia was controlled by political elites of both the Conservative and Liberal Parties and powerful special interests, such as the Roman Catholic Church.

The decentralization of education was an important element of this strategy for pulling Colombia back from the brink of chaos. Like all other major social institutions, education was tightly controlled from the center. The Ministry of Education in Bogotá held the purse strings for education and made all important decisions regarding curricula, textbooks, and other matters of educational policy. Teachers were employees of the central government, and salaries were negotiated at a national level.

Ironically, this tightly strung system was only twenty years old and was itself created to correct the abuses of an earlier decentralized system. Under the earlier system, put in place following World War II, local municipalities exercised considerable control over education but lacked the financial, administrative, and political wherewithal to generate revenues, manage schools, and deal with teacher strikes. The centralized system, established in the early 1970s by the ruling National Front, succeeded in improving educational efficiency and putting an end to turbulent teacher strikes. It also ensured that teachers were paid regularly. But over two decades the centralized system, too, succumbed to hardening of the bureaucratic arteries and found itself out of touch with growing demands for increased local autonomy. It was also clear that Colombia needed better schools than it was getting. Primary school enrollment was a respectable 86 percent, but only one of two eligible students was enrolled in secondary school. Moreover, the spending rate on education of 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), while comparable to that of some of Colombia's neighbors, was well below the rates of fast-growing Asian nations. Thus was the stage set for another swing from a centralized to a decentralized system of education.

The government's strategy for decentralization was a twofold effort to "municipalize" basic education and to increase the autonomy of local schools. The first objective was to be reached by transferring financial resources to municipalities and departments; the second, by giving schools responsibility for managing personnel, designing

aspects of the curriculum, and controlling aspects of finance. Parents, teachers, and students were to gain a greater voice in running schools. Inspectors from Bogotá were eliminated, and educational planning was to become a bottom-up rather than a top-down affair.

The politics of decentralizing Colombia's highly centralized school bureaucracy turned out to be complicated indeed. During the constitutional convention, delegates resisted pressures to commit the central government to money transfers that, they argued, could not be sustained in the long run. Eventually they agreed to transfer authority for social services, including education, to municipalities and departments, with appropriate increases in the transfer of funds from the central government and decreases in the size of its bureaucracy.

Writing the provisions of the constitution into law, however, turned out to be a very different matter. The National Planning Department, in agreement with the Ministries of Education and Finance, prepared draft legislation in 1992 spelling out ways of implementing municipalization, school autonomy, private sector participation in education, and a voucher system for poor students at the secondary level. The teachers union vigorously resisted these proposals. Well aware that much of its political muscle came from its ability to negotiate national contracts, the teachers union was opposed to decentralization in principle and used its power to strike with great effectiveness. The Ministry of Education agreed to compromise, and legislation was adopted in 1993 and 1994 reflecting the political balance of power. The powers that devolved to municipalities were limited, and local schools did not get the autonomy to select, hire, and sanction personnel. Most such decisions are made by educational councils in which teachers are represented. A system of teacher evaluation was established, but measures of student outcome, such as test scores, were excluded. The central government thus failed to obtain congressional approval for full-scale municipalization of basic education and school autonomy.

The effects of the decentralization program were mixed. Whether because of decentralization or because of a general increase in public spending, by 1994 the budget for education increased to 3.65 percent of GDP, which was above the target figure of 3.5 percent. Some 70 percent of the increase was directed to municipalities and departments. A voucher system for poor students was set up, and regulations on private schools were removed. Yet, by mid-1993 only 70 percent of schools had been transferred to municipal control, and the remaining 30 percent included many of the country's wealthiest schools. Community members have been slow to exercise their

newly achieved rights of participation. Many of the local organizations exist only on paper.

Several political facts of life help explain the modest success of decentralization of education in Colombia. For one thing, the central government, which pushed the plan for its own reasons, was by no means monolithic. The National Planning Department and the education and finance ministries were all involved but had widely different interests and perspectives. The Ministry of Education lacks prestige within the cabinet, and it has a tradition of revolving-door leadership that undermines whatever professional competence it attracts. It has shown a long-standing propensity to avoid conflicts, notably teacher strikes, at whatever cost. In contrast, the teachers union, with 200,000 members, knows exactly what it wants. Its leadership, from the leftist end of the political spectrum, maintains its authority by concentrating on improving the labor conditions of its members and skillfully uses the weapon of strikes to intimidate the education ministry and other governmental agencies. The Congress could have enacted the legislation, but its members took the position that they would not do so in the absence of an accord between the central government and the union.

Groups that were in line to benefit directly from the reforms were notably absent from the debate. Most leaders in the private sector did not attend government schools and do not send their children to them, so they sat on the sidelines. Parent and community groups were not well organized, nor were the mayors and governors, who had only recently been elected and were unprepared to deal collectively with very complex issues. Moreover, lingering distrust of both the central government and the teachers union was strong.

In short, the decentralization effort in Colombia was successful in providing legitimacy to the government and improving education, but its impact was severely limited by the failure to obtain consensus and the support of important players, including the teachers who deliver education in the classroom.

Political Dimensions of Decentralization

Education in both industrial and developing countries is inherently political. Donors and others who promote school decentralization as a means of improving educational performance must think carefully about the political dimensions of what they are trying to accomplish. They must also recognize that, in seeking to alter the balance of power within national school systems, they are engaging in a political act that will have both supporters and opponents.

Education is political because school systems are:

- *Embodiments of national values.* How well a nation succeeds in educating its citizens is central to national identity. Education systems both mold and reflect a nation's values, customs, languages, and collective priorities. Free and universal education can be a force for nation-building. It can also promote—or stifle—local, regional, tribal, ethnic, and other customs and identity. How a nation distributes its educational resources is a barometer of its commitment to equity and justice.
- *A source of political power.* Schools claim a high proportion of the national budget and employ large numbers of people. The authority to hire, fire, promote, and reassign teachers and other personnel is a rich source of patronage for political leaders.
- *Vehicles for exercising power.* A strong educational system can drive national economic development, and elements of the system can be manipulated for political purposes. Textbooks and curricula, for example, can be used to promote social and political ideologies, and the stance that a government takes in negotiations with teachers unions can have important consequences for elections.
- *Political weapons.* Because the design and management of school systems tend to benefit groups with vested economic and political interests, members of other groups seeking to challenge these interests often choose to do battle over the control of schools.

In the recent statement of its priorities for education, the World Bank (1995, 137) observed, "Education is intensely political because it

affects the majority of citizens, involves all levels of government, is almost always the single largest component of public spending, and carries public subsidies that are biased in favor of the elite."

The political significance of school systems varies among different stakeholders. Political analysis must take into account the interests of important groups:

- *Political leaders and policymakers.* For those in power, the education system is a means of solidifying a political base and carrying out policies. Opponents can use educational issues as a means of winning public support and gaining power.
- *Ministry employees.* The educational bureaucracy has interests that may or may not coincide with those of the policymakers to whom they report or of the educators they serve. Staff members at the central office will seek to protect the jobs that provide them with a livelihood and considerable administrative power, while regional, district, and local officials have similar interests in their own settings. In many countries like Argentina and Chile, ministry employees as a group have been allied with the political opposition and, as such, have become political targets.
- *Teachers.* Usually the largest group of civilian employees, teachers have a stake in maximizing wages and job security. They are often open to changes that will improve educational practice and their own professional reputations, such as more local control of instructional practices, but they are suspicious of changes that will jeopardize their security, such as the elimination of central financing of education.
- *Teachers unions.* While they obviously reflect the interests of teachers, unions are forces in their own right with their own distinct interests to protect. They have a strong stake in maintaining central bargaining and such practices as a centralized system of collecting union dues. Unions are typically allied with particular political parties, usually on the left.
- *Universities.* Tertiary institutions and their faculty members have a stake in the way teacher training is organized. They also have a professional interest in seeing their ideas carried out in schools.
- *Parents.* At the primary level, parents are the ultimate client for schools, and their primary goal for their children is quality education. As a rule, parents do not speak with a collective voice, even at the local level, and a major objective of many school decentralization plans is to mobilize and empower parents to work for better schooling.

- *Local communities.* Parents are the most conspicuous representatives of local communities, but the two groups are not identical. Local officials, for example, may believe that it is more important to invest new funds in improving roads or the water supply than in improving schools.
- *Students.* Primary students have relatively little power but considerable stake in whether the system succeeds in delivering quality instruction. Secondary students will sometimes become politically organized.

Needless to say, all stakeholders tend to be loath to give up the power that they exercise in matters of finance, hiring, curriculum, and the other elements that make up a national educational system.

Politics and Decentralization

If education is inherently political, it goes without saying that any effort to alter the way the system is organized and managed is a political activity. As such, school reform is certain to generate discussion, conflict, and political resistance. Even supposedly technical changes, such as more rigorous certification standards for teachers or the introduction of new pedagogical techniques, have political consequences because they affect who gets hired and promoted and have an impact on the status and professional life of educators.

Moreover, as Cummings and Riddell (1992, 7) have noted, efforts to improve educational systems invariably involve trade-offs. There may be conflicts between the interests of political leaders, such as a desire to control patronage, and those of donors and other educational reformers seeking to improve educational outcomes. Even among those seeking to improve education, there may be disagreements about the relative importance of equity, administrative efficiency, and educational effectiveness. "The trade-offs of alternative policies set in particular contexts must be weighted against each other," the authors observed. "The decision to opt for one path rather than another will be a matter of politics in the end."

Decentralization as a reform strategy is clearly political because its stated intention is to alter the political status quo by transferring authority from one level of government and one set of actors to others. In this case, the short-term political losers are officials and bureaucrats at the center, while the winners are their counterparts at the regional, district, or local levels as well as, one would hope, parents, students,

and ordinary citizens in local communities. The situation is far more complex than this, however, because the short-term losers can become long-term winners.

The obvious question, of course, is why anyone in a position of influence at the center would choose to engage in the outward transfer of power. The reasons for doing so can be positive or negative. Competent and secure leaders could make a judgment that school decentralization constitutes good government and that it will lead to better education and, in the process, popular support for themselves. Donors whose objectives are improved education will work to encourage such transfers. In other cases, however, the motivations have more to do with the preservation of power in the face of overwhelming political forces demanding decentralization. This was the reality that confronted leaders in Colombia.

Weiler (1993, 56) has offered a theoretical basis for understanding school decentralization that has its origins at the center. National political leadership, he argues, must constantly seek to juggle two important but often conflicting objectives: maintaining effective control over their policies and maintaining the legitimacy of its rules. Centralization promotes control, while decentralization fosters legitimacy. Under conditions of conflict, he argues, decentralization can be a useful strategy for managing the conflict and gaining legitimacy. The price, of course, is that it also results in some loss of control for the state. Weiler also observes that the rhetoric of decentralization can occasionally exceed the reality, noting that "the state's interest in maintaining control keeps getting in the way of serious decentralization."

Varieties of Decentralization

Just as the reasons for undertaking school decentralization vary widely from country to country, so too do the forms that it takes. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that no two countries have adopted exactly the same model of school decentralization.

Bray provides a useful working definition of decentralization as "the process in which subordinate levels of a hierarchy are authorized by a higher body to take decisions about the use of the organization's resources" (1984, 5). Such a generalization, however, is only the starting point. Planners in any given situation must decide what elements of the system to decentralize (resource generation, spending authority, hiring, curriculum development, and so on), and they must determine to what levels (regional, district, local, school site)

they will assign each of these elements. Hannaway (1996) suggests that when it comes to designing a decentralization scheme, planners face a "Rubik's Cube set of possibilities."

If only because they have been at it longer, industrial countries differ widely in the degree of centralization and decentralization in their education systems. Indeed, over the decades many have a history of structural pendulum swings. In the United States, for example, whose constitution does not mention the word, education was very much a local affair up through the late nineteenth century. This decentralized system was plagued by inefficiencies and local corruption, so in the early twentieth century a movement developed to centralize school administration under the leadership of educational professionals in districts and states. Now, as the century draws to a close, this centralized system is coming under attack as being too bureaucratic and unresponsive to local needs. A movement favoring decentralization through such means as vouchers, charter schools, and school-based management is gaining force. The lesson would seem to be that centralized and decentralized systems both have potential benefits and liabilities. Every reform aimed at correcting abuses contains the seeds of the next set of problems.

Most developing countries, however, have centralized systems of education, often a legacy of colonial rule. In many of these systems, to use Weiler's (1993) characterization, control was typically of more concern than legitimacy. It is probably also fair to say that, since these systems are relatively new, developing countries have not had the time to experience the pendulum swings characteristic of older industrial nations. Colombia, which has had one pendulum swing, would be an exception.

In analyzing the varieties of decentralization, conventional wisdom makes two sorts of distinctions that are useful in analyzing the politics of reform.

Political versus Administrative Decentralization

The first distinction is between political and administrative decentralization. Political, or democratic, decentralization involves assigning power to make decisions about education to citizens or to their representatives at lower levels of government. Authority is shifted to include people outside the system. Administrative, or bureaucratic, decentralization, on the other hand, is essentially a management strategy. Political power remains with officials at the top of the organization, but responsibility and authority for planning, management,

finance, and other activities is assigned to lower levels of government or to semiautonomous authorities. Authority remains within the system (Williams 1993).

The distinction between political and administrative decentralization is critical in devising a strategy for school decentralization. Because it is essentially a management issue, a decision to engage in administrative decentralization can be carried out without extensive consultation outside the education ministry or the government as a whole. Political decentralization, however, involves a multitude of stakeholders, both inside and outside the government, all of whom will have interests to protect or pursue. Political decentralization is thus a far more complex undertaking that requires, among other things, careful attention to the building of popular consensus.

Deconcentration, Delegation, and Devolution

The second distinction relates to the kind of power that is decentralized. The weakest form of decentralization is deconcentration, which is no more than the shifting of management responsibilities from the central to regional or other lower levels in such a way that the central ministry remains firmly in control. Delegation is a more extensive approach to decentralization under which central authorities lend authority to lower levels of government, or even to semiautonomous organizations such as churches, with the understanding that the delegated authority can be withdrawn. Devolution is the most far-reaching form of decentralization in that the transfer of authority over financial, administrative, or pedagogical matters is permanent and cannot be revoked at the whim of central officials.

These distinctions are relevant to strategic thinking because—like administrative decentralization—deconcentration and delegation can be carried out as a matter of government policy without extensive outside consultation. True devolution of power, on the other hand, requires widespread support from the various affected stakeholders.

A Matter of Balance

Given the Rubik's Cube nature of the options open to educational policymakers, the relevant issue is not whether to decentralize or not. Elmore (1993, 9) observes that in the practical world of political and administrative decisions no "absolute" values attach to centralization or decentralization.

Planners should seek the optimum balance or mix of centralized and decentralized elements. The critical question becomes: what levels of government are best suited in any given set of particular circumstances to carry out what functions of the educational system? In general it is fair to say that central authorities should concentrate on setting goals, generating resources, targeting resources to meet special needs, and monitoring performance. Everyday management of schools is best devolved to lower-level authorities, even to local schools.

While the principle of seeking the right balance of centralized and decentralized functions is no doubt valid, it also begs certain questions and must address certain political realities. It can be argued, for example, that the hiring of teachers should devolve to regional or district authorities or even to elected boards of local schools. Teachers unions, however, are likely to resist any weakening of centralized systems that allow them to maintain a united front in negotiating salaries and working conditions. Similarly, theory says that curriculum development requires a level of expertise appropriate to central offices, yet there is a body of research showing that the professional interaction that results when teachers in local schools assemble to write curricula is a powerful force for improving education (Hannaway 1993).

In seeking to develop an appropriate balance of formal educational functions, it is important to arrive at an appropriate balance of political objectives and needs and to create consensus among the various actors in support of this balance.

Several questions are crucial to this analysis:

- What are the goals served by decentralization?
- What are the interests of the various stakeholders?
- How can the goals be achieved in ways that take the various stakeholder interests into account?

These questions are the focus of the next two chapters.

Why Decentralize?

The most important political questions in school decentralization have to do with goals. Why is school decentralization being undertaken? What do its backers hope to gain from it both for themselves and others? What public vision is used to build support for decentralization? What are the hidden agendas?

Case studies of decentralization efforts around the world demonstrate that decentralization has been undertaken for a multiplicity of stated and unstated reasons—political, educational, administrative, financial. These reasons can be categorized across a wide spectrum.

Decentralization in Colombia was driven by the need for central political leaders to restore their own credibility and to foster national unity in the face of violence and chaos. At the other end of the spectrum is the decentralization taking place in the newly independent countries that once made up the former Soviet Union. In many of these countries the central governments, stripped of political legitimacy and lacking financial resources, simply lost control of the educational system. Decentralization emerged, in some cases virtually overnight, as a way of filling a political vacuum.

In Hungary, for example, the 1985 Education Act authorized local schools to define their own educational tasks and education system. Teachers were given considerable power in selecting principals, and the old centralized inspection system was scrapped in favor of a more consultative one. Most schools are now owned and run by local authorities with constitutionally guaranteed autonomy with relation to the central government, whose main obligation is to transfer funds to the schools in the form of block grants. What this amounted to, in Halász's (1992, 3) words, was "negative" policymaking.

In Hungary, as in other countries of Eastern Europe, Halász wrote, "decentralization and school autonomy did not appear as a planned response to systemic problems but rather as a reward of the fight for political freedom." The resulting fragmentation has led to serious practical problems. Local schools have learned to manipulate the funding formulas in ways that generate both more revenue

and greater inefficiency, and serious questions have arisen about the administrative capacity of local school officials. Such problems have led to the odd situation of a *decentralized* system struggling for legitimacy.

School decentralization occurred in Colombia and Hungary as a result of crises—one as part of a calculated effort by rulers to maintain authority; the other, to fill a political vacuum. In between these extremes are a multitude of countries that have embarked on decentralization schemes for other reasons. Following are short descriptions of nine such countries, each of which had its own reasons for decentralizing its schools.

Confronting the Regional Problem in Spain

Modern Spain is, as Hanson (1989) puts it, a nation of nations. Largely through accidents of geography, it is built on vestiges of ancient kingdoms, each with its own linguistic traditions and cultural values that have spawned movements for regional political autonomy. Centrist and regional forces squared off in the Spanish Civil War of 1936, and the triumph of the centrists led to forty more years of military dictatorship under General Francisco Franco.

As Spain approached the end of the Franco era in the late 1960s, a series of student demonstrations and other events made it clear that the nation not only had to wean itself from authoritarian ways toward more stable democratic institutions but also it had to do so in a way that took account of the country's regional problem. One possibility was that three important industrial regions would seize on the opportunity of Franco's death to secede from the country. To neutralize these threats, political leaders decided on a strategy of decentralizing governmental functions, including education. The first step came with the General Act on Education and Finance for Educational Reform of 1970, which reorganized the educational system in ways that increased access for children in rural areas.

Franco died in 1975, and three years later a new constitution that brought democracy to Spain was ratified, taking note of the nation's inherent diversity by devolving central functions to seventeen regional governments. These new units, called autonomous communities, were popularly elected, and each received all governmental portfolios, including education. Funds were transferred from central to regional coffers through block grants that could be used for education and other purposes.

During the 1980s the Ministry of Education organized a national debate on a series of proposals for reorganizing the new regional educational systems. Based on the resulting consensus, a school-based management system was set up under which local schools, including government-subsidized private schools, would be run by school councils made up of elected parents, teachers, and students. Their authority includes the right to elect school directors from among candidates in the teaching ranks. The central ministry retained control over the hiring of teachers and the authority to grant degrees.

The results of Spain's decentralization of education have been mixed. Overall funding for education increased during the 1980s, and it is widely believed that the overall condition of education has improved. Yet, many school councils have been slow to assert themselves in the management of schools, and talented teachers have been reluctant to take on the responsibilities of school directorships, largely because of a lack of salary or other incentives.

From a political point of view, however, decentralization of education in Spain was a huge success. A strong consensus was forged among political leaders of various parties to put country before party to avoid the chaos that they all remembered from the days of the Civil War. It was thus critical to the peaceful and orderly transition from authoritarian to democratic government that has been described as the miracle of Spain.

Promoting Local Autonomy in Brazil

In the early 1990s the state of Minas Gerais in northeastern Brazil was enrolling almost all of its young children in first grade, but the quality of education they received was low. Inadequate funding, poorly trained teachers, rigid pedagogies, and overregulated management all contributed to low student test scores and high repetition and dropout rates. Only 40 percent of students were completing all eight grades of primary school.

A new government decided that the road to quality education lay in giving local communities a greater say in running their schools. A series of measures were enacted to grant financial, administrative, and pedagogical autonomy to elected boards in each school composed of teachers, parents, and students over the age of sixteen. Each school receives a grant based on enrollment and special needs, and it is up to the board to decide in a democratic fashion how to spend these funds as well as other monies raised locally. The boards also set short- and

long-term goals for their schools and make the decisions on curriculum, pedagogy, the school calendar, and other matters necessary to meet these goals. Other important functions were maintained at the central level, including centralized bargaining between the teachers union and the government. Union support was also gained by preserving the system under which the ministry withholds dues and passes them on to the national union.

To overcome the long-standing tradition of patronage in appointments, the new system calls for new principals to be elected for three-year terms by the entire school community. Voting is by secret ballot from a shortlist of three candidates who score highest on a series of examinations. Each finalist prepares a three-year plan and presents it to the community. Planners took pains to develop consensus among various interested parties, such as churches, the academic community, and government workers. Citizen response to the new system has been positive. Eighty-five percent of primary schools now have elected principals, and nearly 900,000 people, or 228 per school, turned out for the second round of voting in 1993.

The performance of the boards has varied widely. Little attention was given to training boards in conflict resolution, and in many cases principals continue to dominate the process. Some boards, however, have shown considerable independence. When the principal of State School Pedro II decided to establish a school uniform, for example, the board overrode her decision. Parent members of the board hold office hours before meetings to solicit the questions and views of their constituents. Everyone is permitted to join in the discussion before the board votes.

The twofold program of school autonomy and greater transparency in decisionmaking has led to increased operational efficiency. For example, schools that purchase meals directly have been able to offer better and more diverse menus than those that have continued to receive food from the municipality. Clientelism in the selection of principals has been reduced, and one outside evaluation concluded that "technical and professional criteria are now accepted by politicians and by the educational community as the path that leads to the efficient school management" (Lobo and others 1995, 30)

It is still too soon to evaluate the effects of the new system on student performance, but early results are encouraging. Results of the 1994 achievement tests given to all third grade students show that, in comparison with 1992, scores rose by 7 percent in science, 20 percent in Portuguese, and 41 percent in mathematics.

Cutting Out Middle Management in New Zealand

In 1988 a national commission headed by retired businessman Brian Picot began taking a look at New Zealand's educational system. Picot toured the country, and the commission solicited the views of all interested parties—parents, teachers, political and educational leaders, students, and ordinary taxpayers. The result was a report called *Administering for Excellence* that called for radical change in New Zealand's educational system, and placed decisionmaking as close as possible to the point of implementation. Picot's investigations convinced the government that the existing administrative structure was overcentralized. A follow-up report, *Tomorrow's Schools: The Reform of Education Administration in New Zealand* (Lange 1988), called for the elimination of school boards and just about every other bureaucratic structure that separated local schools from the national government.

The recommendations of the Picot Report were carried out almost in their entirety and resulted in perhaps the most thorough and rapid structural reform project ever undertaken by a developed country. One important factor was the level of consensus that was developed before the reforms were initiated; another was the fact that Prime Minister David Lange took over the education portfolio himself, thus sending an unmistakable signal of its importance. The reforms began in May 1989, and by the time they had run their course, New Zealand had substantially reduced the staff of the central Ministry of Education, abolished the regional level of administration entirely, and shifted responsibility for budget allocation, staff employment, and educational decisionmaking to individual schools.

Under New Zealand's decentralization plan local schools are now run by boards of trustees consisting of five elected parents, the principal, an elected staff representative, and, in secondary schools, a student and four other people chosen to provide expertise or balance. Central to each school's operations is a locally written charter that includes mandatory sections on curriculum but otherwise lays out locally derived goals. Funding still comes from the national treasury on a per-pupil basis, and schools are encouraged to take their money under a "bulk funding" plan that covers all expenses, including teacher salaries. In an effort to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups, including Maori and Pacific Islanders, national subsidies are weighted to reflect the special needs of schools serving these populations.

Any change of this magnitude, of course, has brought problems. Teachers, for example, have complained about the increased workloads that result from their managerial roles, and some school board members took office with inadequate training for their new responsibilities. Predicted cost savings have not materialized, albeit for reasons that can be seen as positive: many schools have opted for increased quality rather than financial savings. Political and educational leaders have been careful to develop broad consensus for each stage of the decentralization process. After publication of a major planning document, *Education for the 21st Century* (Smith 1994), in July 1988 the Ministry of Education organized a four-month campaign in which tens of thousands of New Zealanders offered comments through large public meetings in seventeen cities and towns and through many smaller sessions.

One of the strengths of New Zealand's approach to school decentralization was that the initial administrative reforms were followed by pedagogical reforms that reflected broad consensus on the goals of a national curriculum but also made provisions for schools to add local components. For example, the Onerahi School, which is located in the coastal town of Whangarei north of Auckland, adopted a curriculum that includes outdoor activities such as canoeing, as well as study of the coastal environment. Extensive efforts were also made to ensure that decisions on educational matters such as curriculum content were made by educators rather than political leaders.

Paying Teachers on Time in Mexico

In 1978 the education system in Mexico was highly centralized—and highly inefficient. One out of seven primary-age students lacked access to school, and in poor states such as Chiapas less than 20 percent of students were in school. Wastage rates were high, and new teachers typically waited more than a year for their first paycheck. Payroll mistakes could be rectified only by a costly and time-consuming trip to the capital. It was obvious to policymakers that if Mexico was to progress economically and socially, steps must be taken to increase the efficiency of the school system.

Decentralization of education in Mexico was carried out in three stages. During the first stage, from 1978 to 1982, management of the education system was deconcentrated from the Ministry of Education to thirty-one state delegations, one for each of the states of the Republic of Mexico. The delegations were given responsibilities ranging from budgeting and managing schools to the writing of curriculum and text-

books. Revenue generation, the drafting of the national core curriculum, and labor policy remained in Mexico City. These initial reforms were carried out, in Prawda's (1993b, 5) words, "a la blitzkreig" through a concerted effort by senior leaders, and they had immediate and positive effects. Preschool enrollment increased, especially in rural areas, as did primary and secondary school enrollment rates.

During the second phase, from 1983 to 1988, the government sought to take the additional step of transferring the delegations from central control to the authority of states. It failed, largely because of opposition from the teachers union, which did not relish the thought of negotiating working conditions and other matters with thirty-one separate governmental entities. Resistance also came from staff members of the central ministry who had their own vested interests in the centralized system and had long-standing cooperative arrangements with the teachers. The government, preoccupied with economic restructuring and other issues, proved to be too weak to carry through on its objectives.

In 1988 a new government came to power and negotiated an agreement with the nation's governors and the national teachers union that permitted the transfer to state authorities to proceed. Thus it was only in 1992—fourteen years after the decentralization process was initiated—that the full extent of the plan could be carried out.

The Socialist Spirit in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe gained national independence in 1980 at a time when socialist political ideals were sweeping through Sub-Saharan Africa. In keeping with the spirit of popular participation, self-reliance, and democratic decisionmaking, architects of the new nation sought not only to make services such as education universal but also to decentralize public services as much as possible within the framework of a unitary system of government.

Primary education was organized so that the central government hired and paid teachers and provided a small grant for each student. The Ministry of Education also designed the curriculum, conducted examinations, and assumed the responsibility for training teachers through regional colleges. The construction of primary schools, however, was left to local communities, and management was delegated to a responsible authority. These authorities could be missions, large farms, mines, or newly established rural and district councils, which operated three-quarters of schools. The fifty-seven councils receive a direct grant to cover salaries and general office administration from

the Ministry of Local Government, Rural, and Urban Development. They also had the authority to hire and fire teachers and to disburse to schools the per capita grants and teachers' salaries paid to them by the education ministry.

This system ended up with some difficulties. Teachers complained about delays in payment of their salary, including the fact that some district councils were retaining some of the per-pupil grants for noneducational activities instead of passing them on to the individual schools. The central government also discovered that they were paying for a substantial number of phantom teachers. The overall quality of education seemed low.

In 1987 the Ministry of Education issued a ruling that all teachers would henceforth be public servants paid directly by the government. The councils, backed by the development ministry, balked, and their position was upheld by the courts. This led the education ministry to seek an amendment to the Education Act allowing them to bypass the local government authorities and to direct funds to new school-based structures known as school development committees, in which parents hold a majority of seats. The local district councils argued that if they could not become the channel for the per-pupil grants, they would not assume responsibility for building schools.

The result was a political impasse at all levels of government. The dispute over who would control the per-pupil grants pitted the development ministry, which supported the local councils, against the education ministry, and their conflict was duplicated among officials of the respective ministries at the regional and district levels. The development ministry believes that the decentralization policies of the government of Zimbabwe give them responsibility for the running of schools, while the education ministry argues not only that the rural development councils lack the managerial capacity to operate a decentralized system as originally conceived but also that power should be delegated to parents.

Neither side has developed a clear pedagogical philosophy for decentralization, nor has either attempted to consult with the various stakeholders to hammer out a consensus on the best way to proceed. The impasse continues.

Downloading Fiscal Problems in Argentina

One argument frequently made for the decentralization of educational systems is that it can generate additional resources for education—financial and other. By sharing responsibility for education, the

reasoning goes, local agencies will be motivated to collect more funds for education as well as to spend it more wisely and to monitor results more closely.

That was the argument that Argentina's military government used in 1975 when it assigned financial responsibility for primary schools to the provinces under a cofinancing arrangement. The model chosen was to make use of existing governmental machinery so that authority of educational policy, including curriculum frameworks, would remain a centralized activity but decisions would be carried out regionally.

The problem with this arrangement was that the regional officials were not consulted on the new arrangements and did not want the financial responsibility they were being given. They resented the fact that they were being asked not only to increase salaries for teachers but to pay for the offices, personnel, and administrative costs of the decentralization mechanism. The teachers union and staff members of the Ministry of Education resented what they saw, probably quite correctly, as an attempt by the ruling authorities to weaken their power. The result was a decade of financial chaos. Hanson (1995a, 11) described this "arbitrary" exercise of coercion as "little more than an irresponsible dumping of financial and administrative burdens onto the province."

In 1993 Argentina took the subsequent step of devolving financial responsibility for secondary schools from the central to the regional level. In this case, both sides agreed, and the strength of provincial governments offers hope that this step will be more successful than the earlier decentralization of primary schools.

Laissez-faire Ideology in Chile

During the 1970s the military government of Chile came under the sway of neoliberal economists and social planners, many from the University of Chicago, who argued that the quality of social services would be improved through decentralization and privatization that would foster competition. A particular target of reform was the educational system, which was both highly centralized and seriously deficient. Forty-three percent of the lowest-income children, for example, had no access to formal schooling.

In 1980 the regime transferred authority for running schools from the central government to Chile's 385 (Winkler and Rounds 1993) municipalities and enacted a system of subventions under which the government paid the municipalities a form of voucher based on monthly attendance. The changes reflected the regime's view that the politics

of the past had ruined the country and that teachers as a group were an enemy of progress. Thus, under the reform teachers lost their status as civil servants with rights of tenure, and unions were banned. Schools and municipalities gained control over hiring and firing, setting of wages, and school construction and developed a stake in attracting as many students as they could. They had little autonomy, however, on matters such as curriculum, and few provisions were made for greater participation by parents, teachers, or others in school policymaking.

The decentralization effort did not go according to plan. When difficult economic times set in, the transfer of schools to municipalities was suspended, and schools were ordered not to contribute to unemployment by laying off teachers. Old authoritarian habits continued to subvert the principles of municipal and private school autonomy and community involvement. It became clear that municipalities lacked the capacity to carry out their new responsibilities, and the model did not embrace any plan to modify school practices.

In 1990 a new democratic government came into power and put an end to seventeen years of authoritarian rule. One of its first major policy changes was to begin a second round of decentralization. This time the focus was on democratic reforms, including the popular election of mayors, and on improved teaching and learning. The goal was to have pedagogical decentralization at the school level while strengthening governance at the central, regional, and municipal levels.

Teachers, who had backed the change in government, got back their civil service status, job security, and the right to organize, and the prevailing philosophy was that teaching and learning would improve only if teachers recovered their enthusiasm to work hard. Local schools were given more autonomy in curricular and other educational decisions, and teachers were given a voice in decisionmaking. Teachers pushed for a return to the centralized system, but the government insisted on a more democratic form of organization.

Fostering Democracy in India

India is an enormous country with 900 million people and a diversity of cultures that has produced a nation in which there are eighteen official languages and more than 1,600 dialects. India has a long tradition of democratic political institutions and a continuing stake in promoting citizen involvement in political and social issues. India operates under a federal system of government in which the twenty-five states exercise considerable responsibility, including for education.

In 1992 the national parliament, seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of this federal system, moved to further decentralize the political system. By constitutional amendment, it directed each of the states to establish a three-tiered governance structure of locally elected bodies known as *panchayati raj* institutions. The amendment, the culmination of a long struggle, constituted, in Hannaway's (1995, 3) words, "a dramatic effort to reestablish the primacy of locally elected bodies in the affairs of the state by giving them constitutional authority." The change also sought to redress historical inequities, she noted, by "explicitly identifying the representation of traditionally underserved groups, women, scheduled tribes, scheduled castes."

Responsibilities devolved to the *panchayati raj* institutions—which operate at the district, intermediate, and local levels—include elementary and secondary education. India's educational problems are enormous, as is everything else in the country. Nearly two-thirds of the female population is illiterate, and about a third of children do not attend school regularly. Disparities in access and achievement vary widely both among and within the states.

Decentralization of education is still under way. States had until June 1995 to set up the *panchayati raj* institutions, and the first elections have just been held, so it is too early to assess the overall impact of the changes. The experience of states where these institutions have been functioning for some time has demonstrated a number of practical problems. In many cases, control of the new bodies has been captured by local elites, and locally elected bodies frequently found it difficult to take control of problems such as teacher attendance. The local tax bases by which the *panchayati raj* institutions must raise their revenues are often weak. Perhaps most important, poor people have been reluctant to make their voices heard.

Nevertheless, Hannaway (1995, 13) concluded that India's top-down attempt at "democratic decentralization" can be viewed as an "investment" in the nation's future if it can be extended to all states. "In the short run, there may be tremendous inefficiencies," she commented, "but for many in India these inefficiencies will be well worthwhile if, in the long run, a culture of participation and vigilance emerges at the community level"(Hannaway 1995, 14).

Seeking Economic Development in Venezuela

Many developing countries have turned to school reform as the foundation on which to base their economic development, and some have

chosen decentralization as the strategy for doing so. Among them was Venezuela.

In 1969 the Venezuelan government divided the country into nine regional administrative territories and gave each of them responsibility for each of the central government's major portfolios, including education. The theory was to give these regional entities, which shared common social, economic, and cultural characteristics, considerable authority for planning, budgeting, and managing, with the aim of turning them into the engines of social and economic development. The system entirely bypassed the existing government structures.

While conceptually sophisticated, the regionalization plan ran into operational and political difficulties, including a lack of continuity in leadership. With each new election throughout the 1970s and 1980s victorious political parties made repeated changes in personnel and policies, all in the name of showing their commitment to—and claiming credit for—decentralization. Party loyalists would be promoted directly from the classroom to senior ministry posts. Programs developed at great expense of time and money were abruptly terminated before their effectiveness could be evaluated. Hanson (1995b, 10) describes Venezuela's 1969 decentralization initiative as "the most elegant in design, comprehensive in coverage, noble of purpose and complete in its failure."

In 1991 Venezuela made another attempt at educational decentralization, this time to address problems of inefficiency and corruption by shifting responsibility for schools to the state governors. The latter, however, have refused to accept responsibility for all of the national schools in their areas. They have demanded the right to accept only schools that are in good physical condition, educational programs that meet minimum quality standards, and teachers who meet minimum standards. They have also sought guarantees of financial transfers, including those for teacher pensions. As a result, the decentralization plan is deadlocked.

Effects of Decentralization

The previous chapter showed how nations embark on the decentralization of schools for a wide range of reasons—educational, administrative, financial, and political. The obvious next questions are whether these efforts have achieved their objectives or not and what are the factors that seem to make the difference between success and failure.

Educational Improvement

As noted at the outset, virtually all proponents of school decentralization, whatever their stated and unstated objectives, claim that such reorganization will improve the quality of teaching and learning by locating decisions closer to the point at which they must be carried out and by energizing teachers and administrators to do a better job. In some cases, of course, improved learning has indeed been the primary goal of decentralization, and there are positive results. Early reports from New Zealand, for example, show that decentralization has had a positive impact on student learning. Likewise, third grade students in Minas Gerais improved their scores on tests of basic subjects. In Chile, however, which is one of the few countries where good longitudinal data on test scores are available, scores on the national standardized tests declined (by 14 percent in Spanish and 6 percent in mathematics) during decentralization (Prawda 1993a).

Researchers are quick to point out that student performance is affected by many factors, including outside forces such as the availability of funds. In Chile the score decline could have resulted in part from the pressure on the decentralized system to increase enrollment. In general, researchers have developed very little data showing a direct connection—one way or the other—between decentralization schemes and the performance of students on standardized tests.

Administrative Efficiency

The administrative argument for decentralization is that centralized systems are bureaucratic and wasteful and that empowering authori-

ties at regional or local levels will result in a more efficient system because it eliminates overlays of bureaucratic procedure and motivates education officials to be more productive. Decentralization led to increased operating efficiency in Mexico, where teachers are now paid regularly, and in Minas Gerais, where school autonomy has led to lower costs and better services in areas ranging from maintenance and teacher training to school meals. Much of the success of Mexico's effort to improve the efficiency of its school system was due to the fact that the central government took pains to train personnel at the various subnational levels for their new tasks and to provide additional help when needed. Likewise, decentralization produced substantial reductions in administrative costs in Chile, where the number of ministry employees dropped from 18,522 in 1989 to 8,305 in 1989 (Winkler and Rounds 1993). Jimenez, Paqueo, and de Vera (1988) found that local financing in the Philippines produced overall savings.

On the other hand, decentralization in Papua New Guinea increased the operating cost of the educational system because the cost of adding nineteen provincial government structures increased the payroll. Studies in Jamaica found that school-based management did not lead to the anticipated efficiency gains, primarily because of a lack of training on the part of principals and their lack of knowledge of how to work with the local community. Such problems are by no means limited to developing countries. Speaking of decentralization in Chicago in the United States, Anthony Bryk observed, "We devolved resources and authority down to the schools, but there was no infrastructure in place to support that development. If we're to move beyond where we are now, we're going to need that infrastructure—training for councils, training for principals, looking at issues of incentives and accountability" (cited in Appleborne 1995).

Prawda also recognizes the need for "a lengthy gestation for education decentralization reforms"(1993a, 262). Spain embarked on its decentralization under a staggered plan that withheld devolution of powers until a state was ready and willing to receive them. By contrast, Argentina attempted to impose decentralization virtually overnight and failed almost as quickly. As with the impact on learning, evidence about the relationship between decentralization and administrative efficiency is ambivalent.

Financial Efficiency

Other stated objectives of decentralization are to generate additional revenues for the system as a whole by taking advantage of local

sources of taxation and to reduce operating costs. Argentina provides an example of the shifting of financial responsibility away from the central government to regional and local bodies being followed by an increase in total spending on education. As a share of total government spending, monies for education increased from 16.6 percent to 18.7 percent from 1975 to 1986. By contrast, spending on education in Mexico declined following decentralization, in part because of the post–oil boom recession. Municipalities in Chile increased their overall contributions to education following decentralization, but part of the motivation was undoubtedly related to a decline in the real value of the vouchers received from the central government.

One difficulty with turning spending decisions over to local politicians is that they may be more interested in using available funds for visible, short-term gains, such as roads or irrigation schemes, than in using them for education, where the gains are less immediately apparent and more long-term. During times of economic hardship, decentralization may actually facilitate the reduction of financial resources for education (Hannaway 1994). The failure of decentralization in Venezuela is testimony to the fact that adequate and persistent financing of education are also important for the success of decentralization plans. Rondinelli points out that financial stability is a matter of both will and capacity. "In many countries local governments or administrative units possess the legal authority to impose taxes, but the tax base is so weak and the dependence on central government subsidies so ingrained that no attempt is made to exercise that authority" (Rondinelli 1995, 12.1).

Once again, the impact of decentralization on spending for education is as much a function of context and external economic and political conditions as it is a function of decentralization itself.

Political Goals

The previous chapter demonstrated quite clearly that, whatever its impact on learning and operating efficiency, decentralization of education can achieve political objectives. Decentralization in Colombia turned out to be a practical means of providing legitimacy to the government, and the system of subventions to municipalities in Chile served the ideological objectives of that country's military leaders, as well as their goal of weakening the teachers union. On the other hand, decentralization as a strategy for economic development backfired in Venezuela.

Perhaps the most successful example of decentralization as a means of achieving strictly political ends is that of Spain. In their investiga-

tions into Spanish decentralization, Hanson and Ulrich (1994, 328) found that "almost without exception" the people they interviewed agreed that "the practice of school-based management was not an effective mechanism for improving the quality of management and/or education in the schools." Not only is there a lack of evidence that decentralization improves student performance, but there is a widespread belief that school-based management has actually constituted an obstacle to school improvement because it has failed to create sufficient incentives for capable teachers to take on the job of school principal. On the other hand, decentralization offers incentives to those who do become principals to improve teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, Hanson and Ulrich concede that decentralization in Spain has been a success and is likely to continue. "The real contribution of school based management has little to do with improving administration capability through decentralization, or establishing new directions for educational programs," they write. "The true contribution of school based management is symbolic. That is, it represents in a highly visible manner the practice of democracy at the local level to a nation long denied that basic human right."

Effects on Equity

One negative consequence of decentralization has to do with widening performance gaps between students in wealthy and poor areas. Bringing about more equity—both in the form of inputs like money and outputs like higher test scores—is not always recognized as an overt goal of decentralization. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that in many cases decentralization exacerbates existing rich-poor gaps. Local areas with abundant financial and human resources are in a better position than those with fewer resources to make maximum use of decentralized power, and even where there are universal educational gains, it is the wealthy schools that are most likely to make the greatest gains.

In some cases national governments have made the narrowing of such gaps an explicit goal of decentralization. New Zealand, for example, sought to use its massive restructuring of the educational system to improve the quality of education for its Maori population, as well as for Pacific Islanders and other underserved groups.

Prawda (1993a) found in Mexico and Argentina that regional differences in preschool and primary coverage, repetition and dropout rates, and primary-completion rates grew narrower during periods of decentralization. He suggests that resources in Mexico were better

targeted because decentralization produced closer management and better information about subnational requirements. Argentina also witnessed a decline in regional inequalities of about 18 percent after decentralization even though the share of revenues from regional and local sources increased.

A considerable body of evidence suggests that decentralization—especially when it is successful in increasing the efficiency of the educational system—can have the negative side effect of widening the gap between the quality of education in rich and poor districts. Choice- and school-based management plans, for example, may serve to improve the performance only of children from high-demand families. Decentralization theory holds that decentralization will lead to greater demand for education, especially on the part of those who were previously underserved. In Burkina Faso, however, the shifting of financial responsibility for education to local control increased not only the direct but also the opportunity costs of education and caused many poor students to drop out of school entirely (Maclure 1994).

The Chilean reforms highlighted the problem of educational equity. Ricardo Lagos, the minister of education from 1990 to 1992, noted that decentralization "did little to help poorer school districts overcome their basic handicaps" and that poor school districts continue to show low achievement on national tests of mathematics and Spanish. "If each community ends up with an education that reflects its income and power," he wrote, "decentralization can lead to increased inequalities." Even in a decentralized system, he adds, the center must both ensure minimum levels of quality for all schools and "provide disadvantaged schools with special support" (1993, 4).

To say that decentralization can increase inequity, however, is not to say that it must do so. The fact that decentralization has often exacerbated inequities is not a reason to abandon decentralization. On the contrary, dangers should be generally acknowledged and plans should be made to minimize negative consequences. Central authorities can take steps to ensure that poor schools have the necessary financial and other resources to make use of the flexibility and other positive features of decentralization. In practice, this means reserving a role for the central government to monitor the impact and take compensatory steps, such as special grants to low-performing schools, to preserve increased equity as an objective of school reform. Colombia, for example, adopted a system of vouchers for the poor. Government action must take the form of ensuring a minimum level of quality for all

schools and targeting support for disadvantaged students and their schools. Building such a role for the central government into the process, of course, is a political act.

Some Generalizations

Several themes run through these brief observations about the extent to which the various goals of decentralization are achieved:

- *Political objectives alone can be used to justify a decentralization program.* As demonstrated by Spain and other countries, it is possible to achieve political objectives through decentralization without having an impact on either the administrative and financial efficiency of the system or the quality of student learning. While such objectives are worthy and of paramount importance to political leaders, they are not the primary reason that outside donors and other educational reformers pursue school decentralization. They are interested primarily in improving the overall quality of teaching and learning and doing so in such a way that gains are achieved across the socioeconomic spectrum.
- *There are limits to what administrative decentralization can achieve.* In principle there is no reason to presume that the redesigning of the governmental framework of a nation's educational system will, in and of itself, lead either to administrative and financial efficiency or to better teaching and learning.
- *Decentralization can have a positive impact on the environment of education.* Despite the inherent limitations of decentralization, it is reasonable to suppose that decentralization can create conditions—a new environment, if you will—that are conducive to improved teaching and learning.

If a country's educational bureaucracy is highly inefficient, even corrupt, then decentralization makes sense as a means of providing for a better flow of financial, human, and other resources to local schools. A well-conceived decentralization plan can create conditions favorable to administrative efficiency. It can, for example, locate various administrative functions—revenue generation, teacher hiring, curriculum development, and so forth—at appropriate levels, and it can give citizens and educational officials at all levels a sense of ownership of the system. Likewise, decentralization can create a climate hospitable to a well-designed pedagogical plan. But decentralization by itself is no panacea for the solution of national educational problems.

For these reasons it is important in designing a decentralization plan to be aware of other factors that are likely to have an impact on its success or failure. Effective decentralization will require a well-conceived plan for the sharing of power. As a minimum, efficiency gains would require a supply of talent and commitment at local levels to take advantage of the new structure. Moreover, even an efficient resource delivery system is unlikely to have an impact on teaching and learning unless administrators and teachers also have a strategy for making effective use of these resources. New Zealand is a good example of a country in which decentralization was accompanied by a pedagogical plan designed to make maximum use of the new governance structure.

In short, decentralization is appropriately viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the improvement of teaching and learning. It can create an enabling environment for improved learning, but it cannot, as an organizational strategy, ensure that learning will improve in the absence of other changes.

- *A favorable political environment is essential.* As we have seen, one of the external conditions that can affect decentralization—positively or negatively—is the political environment. Political factors must thus be built into the design of any decentralization plan that hopes to be successful.
- *One condition that is not always necessary is political stability.* Prawda (1993a) notes that in many Latin American countries—Argentina and Colombia, for example—the constant turnover of ministers of education has made continuity of implementation difficult. On the other hand, one factor that does not seem to be a condition for successful decentralization is political stability in the nation as a whole. To the contrary, as Hanson (1995a , 9) writes, "It is precisely during a time of great crisis that major national reforms become possible." In Colombia political instability led to a demand-driven centralization while in other cases—Ethiopia and Spain, for example—decentralization was prompted by credible threats of secession.
- *Alignment of political and other goals is imperative.* Because the success or failure of school decentralization as an organizational model depends to a large extent on outside forces, it is important that these outside forces be recognized and understood and that steps be taken to ensure that they are pushing toward similar objectives. This requires development of consensus among the various actors about the nature of these objectives—in other words, a shared vision.

The Importance of Consensus

The third chapter noted that the term decentralization can have many meanings. Some decentralization schemes are little more than administrative restructuring by central governments that retain firm control of the system. Others represent genuine devolution of power from the center to local communities with the aim of empowering such communities, generating additional resources for schools, and improving educational outcomes.

It is always desirable to have broad support for changes, and we shall see in a moment how the presence or absence of consensus was critical to the success or failure of numerous efforts. But whereas it is possible for administrative-style decentralization to be carried out by government fiat, it is impossible to bring about the legitimate transfer of power without first developing consensus among the various stakeholders who will be affected by the change.

The history of school decentralization is replete with examples of countries where such projects failed precisely because of a lack of commitment to them among important parties. Decentralization in Argentina came a cropper because governors and other regional authorities, who were not consulted on the issue, balked at having to take over the financial burden of schools. Likewise, Venezuelan leaders failed in their initial decentralization efforts in the early 1970s largely because, in setting up nine new regional administrative territories, they attempted to bypass existing government structures. In 1991 they attempted to address inefficiency problems by shifting responsibility to state governors, but the governors resisted the idea of taking on poor-quality schools without adequate financial guarantees.

Leaders of Colombia succeeded in building school decentralization into a new national constitution, but they had to water down their program in the face of vigorous opposition from the teachers union and a consequent lack of support in Congress. Montenegro (1995, 17) summarizes the problem when he notes, "a fragmented central government, lacking the support of the very same ones who were to benefit from the reform, was almost alone in its quest for decentralization,

school autonomy, private sector involvement, and parents' participation." The teachers union, he continues, was the "only effective interlocutor of the Government during discussions of Reform in Congress," and "the lack of effective participation of mayors, governors, private school associations and other groups in the political discussions ensured that the most progressive elements of the Reform were not enacted."

Implicit in this situation was a lack of a coherent vision about what decentralization should look like at various levels. As Montenegro writes, there was no clear and coherent set of educational proposals, and in the absence of such unity no rational distribution of tasks was possible. The first few years of the reform process were thus dominated by power struggles as various parties attempted to shape educational reform according to their own goals and vested interests.

The top officials of Mexico's single ruling party pursued decentralization with what has been described as an exclusionary policy that not only ignored the wishes of the powerful teachers union but aggressively attacked teachers as the enemies of reform. Rather than negotiate with the teachers union, they sought to defuse opposition through co-option by offering teachers jobs in the new regional structures. Significantly, it was only when a new government gained power and struck a deal with teachers that pedagogical decentralization was finally implemented in 1992.

Similarly, initial decentralization efforts in Chile were carried out by the military regime in traditional top-down fashion with no attempt to solicit the support of parents, educators, or ordinary citizens. Leaders also made no effort to provide incentives to the government employees whose job it would be to carry out the reforms. It was only when a democratic government changed course, restored civil service status to teachers, and struck a deal that the second round of pedagogic reforms was enacted. This occurred despite the fact that teachers were still suspicious of school autonomy and preferred a return to the old centralized system.

In some cases the failure to gain popular support for decentralization has more to do with cultural differences than with political strategy. In his study of decentralization efforts in Burkina Faso, Maclure (1994, 249) found that local control of schools was not able to bridge what he called a "fundamental alienation between rural culture and state bureaucracy." Decentralization presumes a collective interest in formal education and a shared belief that schooling will pay off in economic and other ways; but in Burkina Faso, which he describes as "a

political economy characterized by peasant dependency and authoritarian governance" (1994, 250), any such presumption is unwarranted. In the absence of substantial political reforms, "all measures aimed at decentralizing educational administration and at inducing broader participation in school management stand little chance of significantly improving the primary school system in rural regions."

The history of school decentralization also contains many examples of countries where leaders sought to build consensus for reform. Not surprisingly, these happen to be the countries where decentralization was most successful. A textbook case of building decentralization on a base of maximum public consensus is New Zealand. There was general agreement in the country in the late 1980s that the existing system was not as good as it needed to be, and the plan for decentralization was first put forward by the Picot Commission, a citizens group that based its recommendations to a large extent on conversations with New Zealanders from all walks of life. The decision to push through a decentralization scheme was made by a Labor government, but the policy was embraced and carried forward by two subsequent Conservative prime ministers. At each stage in the implementation process, draft documents were circulated for public comment and then revised accordingly. For example, after a first draft of the policy document *Education for the 21st Century* (Smith 1994) was released, the Ministry of Education then organized four months of public consultation that included public meetings in seventeen cities and towns and smaller meetings in other places. Submissions received on the document represented the views of more than 100,000 New Zealanders. Because of such efforts to ensure a massive buy-in on the part of the public, New Zealand became one of those rare places where a major reform effort was carried out in its entirety.

Spain is another example of a country where leaders were careful to make sure that consensus existed before plunging ahead with decentralization. Political decentralization developed out of strong public backing for maintaining Spain as one nation while at the same time making provisions for regional autonomy. There was a collective will not to revisit the suffering that marked the Civil War as well as what Hanson (1989, 131) describes as a national "euphoria that linked the promises of democracy with increased socioeconomic development and regionalism."

As already noted, the various political parties put aside their differences when it came to regionalization, and leaders were careful to move slowly but deliberately in instituting self-rule and to make sure

that consensus on autonomy existed in each state before it was granted. The three potentially secessionist states of Galicia, Catalonia, and the Basque Provinces, whose citizens had already expressed a desire for autonomy, followed a rapid route to greater control of their own affairs immediately, while others followed an exceptional route that required votes by municipal and regional councils and a popular referendum aimed at building and demonstrating popular consensus for the new responsibilities. Six regions qualified under the latter provisions.

As a result of the dramatic political changes, education in Spain was no longer an enterprise that reflected only the views of a socioeconomic elite, the Roman Catholic Church, the military, and educational bureaucrats. When the Ministry of Education set out in the 1980s to make reforms affecting the regional educational systems, it organized what Hanson (1989, 135) terms a "national debate" that included well-publicized open meetings where parents, teachers, students, and interested citizens could make their views known. The result was that, when it came to educational policy, the forces of national unity tended to triumph over the centrifugal forces of regionalism. "These efforts toward negotiated national consensus have proven considerably more acceptable to the regions that jealously guard their quasi-autonomy than techniques involving more direct intervention," writes Hanson. "The Spanish approach to policy changes that impact on the decentralized regions is slow, inefficient, often out of control (and in the streets)," he notes, "but it appears particularly suited to a new democratic order that is still feeling its way" (1989, 135–36).

Other countries have organized national debates as a prelude to school decentralization. In Ghana the process of national consultation extended from the head of state down to every community through a series of town meetings. In Mauritius in 1990 (Bhowon 1996), leaders organized extensive public consultation on a far-reaching master plan for that nation that included strengthening school-level management. A strategy paper was circulated for public debate, and a televised national seminar was conducted on the plan to ensure countrywide participation and consultation. The views of teachers were solicited on controversial topics such as performance evaluation and their role in curriculum development. The significance of this process, according to one analysis, was to "move educational policymaking from the close province of the professional educators (and government) to a more open forum involving parents, vested interests, lobbyists, unions and the community at large" (Bhowon 1996, 1).

Building Consensus

We began by observing that school reform in general—and decentralization of school systems in particular—is inherently political. The corollary of this is that decentralization efforts often succeed or fail for reasons that are political rather than technical. Moreover, as we saw, decentralization schemes can achieve political objectives that, while perhaps worthy in themselves, do not necessarily translate into improved teaching and learning. In most cases these reforms were imposed by a central government as a matter of policy and without any attempt to develop broad consensus except, perhaps, on the part of local and regional authorities charged with carrying out a very top-down decentralization. In some cases, the lack of consensus took the form of outright opposition from teachers or other groups. In many cases the success of decentralization efforts was shortlived.

Researchers are almost unanimous in arguing that if school decentralization is going to be successfully carried out and have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning, it must be built on a foundation of broad consensus among the various actors involved and the various interest groups affected by such a change. Experience suggests eight steps that planners and policymakers, both inside and outside the system, can take to develop such consensus.

- *Identify stakeholders and their interests.* A careful analysis should be made of all the individuals and groups who have a stake in education and of what each one is likely to gain or lose from decentralization. These include the ruling political party, regional and local governmental officials, ministry of education employees, teachers and teachers unions, parents, university professors, and professional associations, as well as outside groups such as churches and donors.
- *Build legitimate interests into the model.* As far as possible, decentralization should be designed to take into account the major

concerns of the various stakeholders. For example, teachers might be persuaded to take on the burdens of shared decisionmaking and accept the uncertainties of local accountability so long as their financial security was assured through a continuation of centralized salary negotiations.

- *Organize public discussion.* The most successful decentralization programs have been those that were accompanied by widespread public discussion—and thus widespread understanding—of their goals and methods. Individuals and groups will be more likely to accept changes that are not necessarily in their own best interests if they understand the reasons for the changes, have a chance to participate in the debate, and believe that the process has been honest and transparent. A national forum can be carried out through the mass media, well-publicized meetings, organized debates, publications, and other means. Public discussion should focus on the goals of decentralization, especially its likely impact on the quality of education, and planners should make conspicuous use of feedback from the public discussion in planning the next steps.
- *Clarify the purposes of decentralization.* An important thread that runs through successful decentralization efforts is the existence of a shared vision of what is to be accomplished. This shared vision begins with clarity among political leaders at the top, who must not only signal their ideas and commitment to lower levels of administration but also be willing to work with local organizations that are outside the direct control of the central government.
- *Analyze the obstacles to decentralization.* Careful analysis should be made of the problems that are likely to arise. These include not only overt opposition from groups such as teachers unions but side effects, such as retrenchment in the public sector or lack of capacity on the part of local school committees. Strategies should be developed to address these problems.
- *Respect the roles of various actors.* In addition to recognizing the legitimate interests of the various parties involved, it is important to respect their respective roles. For example, political leaders should respect the right of educators to make decisions on curriculum or textbook selection. One key to the building of consensus is for each set of participants to be respected for their particular strengths.
- *Provide adequate training.* Participants in decentralization programs must be prepared to take on their new roles and responsi-

bilities. Thus, it is important to provide local government officials with the training that they will need to assume new duties and to give parents and other citizens the backup they will need to take part in school-based decisionmaking. Parents need to be shown how to take initiative rather than deferring to authorities, and attention should be paid to the full participation of women. Consensus is not possible unless everyone is in a position to pull his or her weight.

- *Develop a monitoring system.* The development of consensus is not a one-shot affair. Rather, it is a continuous process of actions, discussion, and corrective actions based on feedback from various stakeholders. To facilitate this continuous discussion, it is important to make reliable information available to all participants on matters ranging from the goals of decentralization to its impact on standardized test scores.

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